Best viewed with eyes open...

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Some time ago I wrote about browser usage, and suggested that all good website designers/maintainers should build to accommodate all of their potential visitors, and therefore should build a 'browser-agnostic' site. A new and hopefully short-lived variation of this philosophy is emerging, whereby evangelists are touting that sites should be built to suit only 'standards-compliant browsers' — standards as decreed by W3C [The World Wide Web Consortium — http://www.w3.org]. To quote W3C's mission statement: 'W3C was founded in October 1994 to lead the World Wide Web to its full potential by developing common protocols that promote its evolution and ensure its interoperability.'

However, whilst I wholeheartedly support and promote W3C's ideals of a universally-accessible, semantic, trustworthy, interoperable, evolvable, decentralised, and 'cooler' web, I do not support the view of those who believe that standards must rule, and that websites should only support 'standards-compliant' web browsers. This may appear to be a contrary view. But it is not. A quote from Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web:

> 'Anyone who slaps a "This page is best viewed with browser X" label on a web page appears to be yearning for the bad old days, before the web, when you had very little chance of reading a document written on another computer, another word processor, or another network.'
> Tim Berners-Lee in Technology Review, July 1996

...and the W3C express a similar view in their 'Web content accessibility guidelines 1.0', at http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10/#transform-gracefully:

> 'By following these guidelines, content developers can create pages that transform gracefully. Pages that transform gracefully remain accessible despite any of the constraints described in the introduction, including physical, sensory, and cognitive disabilities, work constraints, and technological barriers.'

But where the 'standards-compliant' proselytisers jump off the rails is when they demand that non-standard browsers should *not* be supported. In other words, either the end-user has installed the 'right' software, or else the site will — at best — look a mess, or in the worst case, not be viewable at all.

However, rather than revisiting 1996 all over again, I notice that these proselytisers are changing their tune somewhat. Now, when you visit their sites, the message is:

> 'This site's design is only visible in a graphical browser that supports web standards, but its content is accessible to any browser or internet device.'

Bravo. At least now a concession is being made to the 'non-compliant' amongst us. Before, the message was often much blunter: 'Please consider upgrading to one of the following browsers, which make it easier for web builders to be sure the sites you visit will work correctly.' In other words, either you conform to our ideals, or you

miss out. My answer to this? Site owner 0, site visitor 1. Put simply, the loss is the site designer's, not the visitor's.

In case you are wondering what the fuss is all about (because you choose to use the latest web browser built by a large software company based in Redmond, USA), there are plenty of disgruntled users around the web. Almost daily I hear reports of yet another website that is rendered incapable of displaying anything at all to visitors who are not using the latest and greatest Microsoft products.

I am not pitching against Microsoft here. I am upset about site designers who build without consideration for their audience. And I suspect that most of these people have surplus bandwidth, have good hardware, and the latest software. Strangely enough, these people are often preaching to themselves.

Some militant coalitions are advocating that sites conform to the W3C standards and W3C standards alone. However, they miss the point that there are, and always will be, many web browsers in use around the world that do not, and never will conform. Why is this so? Because in the early days of browser development, software developers built browsers that only loosely accommodated the then-emerging 'standards'. As the browser war moved into full swing, with Netscape slugging it out with Microsoft, new features were implemented that did not conform to the then-emerging standards. Each developer found better ways to implement a new feature, in some instances the standards reflected this, and in many it did not. Even today, there are very few browsers which fully support all known standards (a moveable feast at the best of times).

Given that there will always be a mix of compliant and non-compliant web browsers in use, the site designer is offered little choice in site design. It's not enough to build sites that only support CSS Level 3, or XML 1.0, or XHTML 1.1 — sites must be built that look presentable in all browsers that are likely to be used to access the site. Check the code of the pages that you visit. Far too many have scripts that check for what browser you are using, what plug-ins you might have, and what operating system you use. These scripts filter delivery of content according to a string of conditional responses. A house of cards, if ever there was one. All too often, the designer does not take into account all possible permutations of browsers, operating systems and plug-ins — resulting in an absolute dog's breakfast of site rendering. And, as always, if the site cannot be viewed properly, it is the designer's loss, not the viewers.

Tim Berners-Lee was right in suggesting that interoperability is the key. His utopian view was to create an environment that does not rely on a certain platform, a certain browser. This I do support, wholeheartedly.

For a thorough test of your browser and your sanity, try visiting Jay Boersma's 'Web Page From Hell' [http://www.ecnet.net/users/gas52r0/Jay/] — it's a real (tongue-firmly-in-cheek) beauty! ∎

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